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ABSTRACT

In recognition of the special challenges that rural areas face in delivering services to students with disabilities, the boards of education of five rural counties on Maryland's Eastern Shore created the Mid-Shore Special Education Consortium in 1973. The Consortium counties represent a population of 24,000 students and provide special education services to approximately 13 percent of these students. The consortium is committed to keeping children with their families and in their community schools. The goals of the consortium include developing cost-effective service delivery models for disabled students, assisting member counties in implementing these models, recruiting specialized personnel, providing staff development, providing services to students in the least restrictive environment, and monitoring and evaluating the appropriateness and cost-effectiveness of the consortium. The functions and organization of the consortium's advisory board are described, as are the fiscal system and personnel program. With the move to an inclusive approach to special education, the consortium's service delivery model has evolved from regionally-based classrooms to an itinerant model that allows disabled students to attend their neighborhood schools with nondisabled peers and have specialized services brought to them. Services include occupational and physical therapy, audiology, vision, hearing, and clinical psychology. (TD)

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THE MID-SHORE SPECIAL EDUCATION CONSORTIUM FROM COMPETITION TO COLLABORATION

INTRODUCTION

The Mid-Shore Special Education Consortium is a collaborative organization comprised of the Boards of Education of Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's, and Talbot Counties located on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The Shore represents a long narrow strip of coastal land separated from the rest of the State by the Chesapeake Bay on the west and the Atlantic Ocean on the east. The isolated, rural nature of the area's geography coupled with sparse population, limited tax base, economic diversity and widespread poverty make the area very unique within the State of Maryland as a whole. The Consortium counties represent a total population of 24,000 students and provide special education services to approximately 13% of these students. The Consortium counties are committed to building local capacity with system reforms initiatives and keeping children with their families and in their community schools.

In rural environments such as Maryland's Eastern Shore, the cost of delivering services to students with disabilities is high even under the best of conditions; low-incidence disabilities present even greater challenges to already strained educational budgets. In recognition of this fact, the Superintendents of Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's and Talbot Counties (Mid-Shore Region) created the Mid-Shore Special Education Consortium to maximize the effective utilization of available resources and to provide quality services for students with disabilities.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In 1973, school officials from Caroline, Dorchester, Kent, Queen Anne's, and Talbot Counties formed a study group to discuss alternatives for providing special education services. From this collaborative effort, regional classes were organized in three of the five counties. These classrooms continued until 1983 when a comprehensive study indicated that each county should operate all special education classes locally, but cooperate in offering low-incidence related services. This model is currently in operation today.

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ORGANIZATION

COMPOSITION OF CONSORTIUM ADVISORY BOARD

The Consortium is governed by an Advisory Board consisting of the following voting members; the person who supervises special education programs in each member county, and ex-officio representatives from the Maryland School for the Blind and the Division of Special Education of the Maryland State Department of Education. The Chair of the Advisory Board rotates alphabetically by county. The Chair may appoint members of the Advisory Board to serve on committees as the need arises. The Advisory Board will meet no fewer than nine times a year.

FUNCTIONS OF THE CONSORTIUM ADVISORY BOARD

The Consortium Advisory Board's role is to manage the programs and services which are designed to accomplish the purposes and goals of the Consortium. Its main functions are to:

a. Ensure that all financial transactions are executed in accordance with state and federal guidelines;
b. Carry out the directives of participating Superintendents;
c. Work cooperatively with the participating counties and their school administrators and staff;
d. Establish and maintain appropriate and proper communications with participating Consortium counties;
e. Coordinate and supervise Consortium activities;
f. Recruit and hire Consortium staff; observe and evaluate; and assist Consortium staff in their designated responsibilities;
g. Schedule meetings of the Advisory Board and serve as administrative officers for the Board;
h. Ensure that appropriate minutes and records of Consortium Advisory Board actions and decisions are maintained;
i. Establish and maintain appropriate communications with the State Department of Education;
j. Conduct project activities in accordance with Consortium policies and procedures;
k. Advise participating Superintendents of the status of Consortium activities and make recommendations as appropriate;
l. Develop and present the annual Consortium budget and project application to participating Superintendents and the Maryland State Department of Education;
m. Develop and maintain various educational programs and services;
n. Maintain a system for the assignment of staff;
o. Provide for staff development and inservice programs for Consortium personnel;
p. Disseminate Consortium information; and
q. Perform other Consortium-related duties as determined

Goals and Objectives

The Consortium exists to support the efforts of individual counties in serving students with disabilities in a cost effective manner and to provide appropriate special education programs and services to identified students with disabilities. The goals of the Consortium include developing cost effective service delivery models for students with disabilities and assisting member counties in implementing these models as appropriate; developing resources for recruiting specialized personnel; collecting and evaluating the usefulness of existing services, programs, equipment, and materials; providing the necessary staff development to implement and adapt new services, programs, equipment, and materials; providing services to students in the least restrictive environment, and conducting ongoing monitoring of the appropriateness and cost-effectiveness of the Consortium.

Memorandum of Agreement

The memorandum of agreement which exists for the Consortium includes factors concerning fiscal management and office space; commitment of special education supervisors' time to the Consortium; superintendents' agreement to meet periodically during the school year, and providing notice if any county wishes to terminate their affiliation with the Consortium. In addition, the agreement details how staff roles and responsibilities are approved and documented.

Fiscal System

One county serves as the fiscal agent for the Consortium. Federal, state, and local funds are utilized to support the program. Staff employed to serve in the Consortium are processed through this fiscal agent and are paid salaries and benefits consistent with other comparable personnel in the fiscal agent county. The fiscal agent submits monthly financial reports to the Advisory Board indicating the expenditure of funds.

The Consortium Advisory Board prepares an annual budget for the approval of the five superintendents. This budget is comprised of local shares from each member county and additional federal discretionary money provided in the form of grants from the Maryland State Department of Education. The expenditure of Consortium funds is approved by the Consortium Advisory Board.

Personnel

All staff positions in the Consortium are established by the Advisory Board and approved by the superintendents. Job descriptions for all approved positions are included in the Consortium Handbooks. Currently, the Consortium employs individuals who comprise Vision, Hearing, Mobility (occupational therapy and physical therapy), and Clinical teams.

Facilities

The Mid-Shore Special Education Consortium operates with office space in the county which serves as the fiscal agent. Rental for the office space is provided for in the annual budget and reflects the only "administrative costs" for the Consortium. All other funds are directed to the provision of service to students, with the exception of the clerical staff. Each staff person has a desk in the main office but due to the itinerant nature of their jobs rarely spends time in the office. Each staff member is deployed to one or more of the individual member counties and reports to assigned schools. Therefore, the Consortium is very much an entity without walls.

Staff Development

Staff development for the entire Consortium staff is provided two times a year. In addition, The Consortium Board provides staff development opportunities relative to new initiatives within each discipline. Staff members are also provided with a stipend to attend at least one conference per year.

Recruitment, Deployment, Retention of Staff

The Consortium aggressively recruits specialized staff in a cost effective manner due to collaborative efforts among the five member counties preventing competition for staff. The one time costs of recruiting for Consortium personnel as a group provide great savings for the individual member counties.

Staff is deployed to maximize the needs of students throughout the five county region. The Consortium Advisory Board strives to maintain a basic level of service delivery which individual counties may have to supplement if their needs are greater than the basic floor of services.

The Consortium Advisory Board has been very successful in retaining staff across the Clinical, Hearing, and Vision Teams. The retention of occupational and physical therapists has been of great concern over the past 5 years. There is tremendous competition for these personnel among many different organizations. The Advisory Board is continually investigating creative options to recruit and retain these individuals.

SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEM

The Consortium concept was designed to provide a wide variety of services to students over a large geographic area. Approximately 1000 students with disabilities currently benefit from the services provided by Consortium personnel. Services include Occupational and Physical therapy, Audiology, Vision, Hearing, Orientation and Mobility (occupational therapy and physical therapy), and Clinical Psychology provided by the

following teams: Clinical Team (4 part-time school psychologists and 3 clinical resource specialists); Vision Team (2 teachers of the visually impaired and 1 teacher who is dually certified in Vision and Orientation and Mobility); Hearing Team: (1 audiologist and 1 teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing); and the Mobility Team (2 part-time occupational therapists, 1 physical therapist, 1 occupational therapy assistant, and additional contracts with other agencies to provide OT and PT services); and 1.5 clerical staff.

An itinerant service delivery model allows students with disabilities to attend their neighborhood schools with non-disabled peers and have the specialized services brought to them. These services are fully integrated into each student's school based program.

In addition to the specialized staff, the Consortium counties collaborate in the acquisition and sharing of equipment. Recently, the counties have also addressed the federal requirement for providing assistive technology through a variety of efforts. Examples of these include the development of an outreach Master's program in assistive technology in cooperation with John Hopkins University, partnerships with the Maryland School for the Blind to conduct assistive technology evaluations, training local teams to do assistive technology evaluations, and the establishment of an assistive technology library.

With the move from highly restrictive self-contained special schools and special classes to a more inclusive approach, the Consortium service delivery model has evolved from regionally-based classrooms to an itinerant related services model. Staffing changes have been adjusted to meet this challenge.

ADVANTAGES OF THE CONSORTIUM MODEL

The advantages of the Consortium model as an organizational system to provide high quality special education services to students with low incidence disabilities are many. The Consortium has been in existence as an organization since 1973 and continues to function as an effective system because of its flexibility and ability to change along with the identified needs among the member counties. Having a five county organization allows for a cost effective service delivery system where all areas of operation can be shared. This division of labor enables the Consortium to provide 90% of the budget for services to students with disabilities and ensure a full package of required related services which individual member counties may not be able to deliver given funding issues and recruitment concerns.

The sharing of staff development, recruitment of staff, and observation and evaluation of staff are examples of other advantages of our collaborative efforts as a Consortium. The administration of the Consortium remains highly responsive to local needs through the active management of the Advisory Board.

Ongoing program evaluation is conducted to ensure the accountability of the organization and facilitate growth.

The Mid-Shore Special Education Consortium is a confederacy based on locally identified needs. The organizational structure of the Consortium is flexible based on these needs and thrives on relationships among member counties which promote trust, collaboration, and professional support.